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*Shakespeare's  
Sonnets*

WITH DETAILED NOTES  
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SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

EDITED BY BARBARA A. MOWAT  
AND PAUL WERSTINE

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## **From the Director of the Library**

Shakespeare has never been more alive as author, playwright, and poet than he is today, with productions being staged all over the world, new film versions appearing on screen every year, and millions of students in classrooms at all levels absorbed in the human drama and verbal richness of his works.

The New Folger Library Shakespeare editions welcome the interested reader with newly edited texts, commentary in a friendly facing-page format, and illustrations, drawn from the Folger archives, that wonderfully illuminate references and images in the plays and poems.

In these editions, students, teachers, actors, and thousands of other readers will find the best of modern textual scholarship and up-to-date critical essays, written especially for these volumes, that offer original and often surprising interpretations of Shakespeare's characters, action, and language.

I thank editors Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine for undertaking this ambitious project, which is nothing less than an entirely new look at the texts from the earliest printed versions. Lovers of Shakespeare everywhere must be grateful for the breadth of their learning, the liveliness of their imaginations, and the scholarly rigor that they bring to the challenge of re-editing the plays and poems.

Gail Kern Paster, Director  
The Folger Shakespeare Library

## Editors' Preface

In recent years, ways of dealing with Shakespeare's texts and with the interpretation of his plays and poems have been undergoing significant change. This edition, while retaining many of the features that have always made the Folger Shakespeare so attractive to the general reader, at the same time reflects these current ways of thinking about Shakespeare. For example, modern readers, actors, and teachers have become interested in the differences between, on the one hand, the early forms in which Shakespeare's plays and poems were first published and, on the other hand, the forms in which editors through the centuries have presented them. In response to this interest, we have based our edition on what we consider the best early printed version of a particular play, poem, or collection of poems (explaining our rationale in a section called "An Introduction to This Text") and have marked our changes in the text—unobtrusively, we hope, but in such a way that the curious reader can be aware that a change has been made and can consult the "Textual Notes" to discover what appeared in the early printed version.

Current ways of looking at the plays and poems are reflected in our brief prefaces, in many of the commentary notes, in the annotated lists of "Further Reading," and especially in each edition's "Modern Perspective," an essay written by an outstanding scholar who brings to the reader his or her fresh assessment of the play, poem, or collection of poems in the light of today's interests and concerns.

As in the Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare, which this edition replaces, we include explana-

tory notes designed to help make Shakespeare's language clearer to a modern reader, and we place the notes on the page facing the text that they explain. We also follow the earlier edition in including illustrations—of objects, of clothing, of mythological figures—from books and manuscripts in the Folger Library collection. We provide a brief account of the life of Shakespeare and an introduction to the text itself. We also include a section called "Reading Shakespeare's Language," in which we try to help readers learn to "break the code" of Elizabethan poetic language.

For each section of each volume, we are indebted to a host of generous experts and fellow scholars. The "Reading Shakespeare's Language" sections, for example, could not have been written had not Arthur King, of Brigham Young University, and Randall Robinson, author of *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language*, led the way in untangling Shakespearean language puzzles and shared their insights and methodologies generously with us. "Shakespeare's Life" profited by the careful reading given it by the late S. Schoenbaum. Our commentary notes in this volume were enormously improved through consultation of several of the more recent scholarly editions of the *Sonnets*. These editions are listed in our "Introduction to This Text," page xxxvii. We, as editors, take sole responsibility for any errors in our editions.

We are grateful to the authors of the "Modern Perspectives"; to Peter Hawkins, Steven May, and Marion Trousdale for helpful conversations about the *Sonnets*; to the Huntington and Newberry Libraries for fellowship support; to King's College for the grants it has provided to Paul Werstine; to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which provided him with a Research Time Stipend for 1990–91; to R. J. Shroyer of the University of Western Ontario for essential computer support; to the Folger Institute's Center for Shakespeare

Studies for its sponsorship of a workshop on "Shakespeare's Texts for Students and Teachers" (funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and led by Richard Knowles of the University of Wisconsin), a workshop from which we learned an enormous amount about what is wanted by college and high-school teachers of Shakespeare today; to Alice Falk for her expert copyediting; and especially to Steve Llano, our production editor at Washington Square Press, whose expertise and attention to detail are essential to this project.

Our biggest debt is to the Folger Shakespeare Library—to Gail Kern Paster, Director of the Library, whose interest and support are unending, and to Werner Gundersheimer, the Library's Director from 1984 to 2002, who made possible our edition; to Deborah Curren-Aquino, who provides extensive editorial and production support; to Jean Miller, the Library's former Art Curator, who combs the Library holdings for illustrations, and to Julie Ainsworth, Head of the Photography Department, who carefully photographs them; to Peggy O'Brien, former Director of Education at the Folger and now Director of Education Programs at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, who gave us expert advice about the needs being expressed by Shakespeare teachers and students (and to Martha Christian and other "master teachers" who used our texts in manuscript in their classrooms); to Allan Shneron and Mary Bloodworth for their expert computer support; to the staff of the Academic Programs Division, especially Solvei Robertson (whose help is crucial), Mary Tonkinson, Kathleen Lynch, Carol Brobeck, Liz Pohland, Sarah Werner, Owen Williams, and Daniel Busey; and, finally, to the generously supportive staff of the Library's Reading Room.

Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine

## Shakespeare's Sonnets

Few collections of poems—indeed, few literary works in general—intrigue, challenge, tantalize, and reward as do Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Almost all of them love poems, the *Sonnets* philosophize, celebrate, attack, plead, and express pain, longing, and despair, all in a tone of voice that rarely rises above a reflective murmur, all spoken as if in an inner monologue or dialogue, and all within the tight structure of the English sonnet form.

Individual sonnets have become such a part of present-day culture that, for example, Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds") is a fixture of wedding ceremonies today, and Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day"), Sonnet 29 ("When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes"), and Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold")—to name only a few—are known and quoted in the same way that famous lines and passages are quoted from *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth*. Yet it is not just the beauty and power of individual well-known sonnets that tantalizes us, but also the story that the sequence as a whole seems to tell about Shakespeare's love life. The 154 sonnets were published in 1609 with an enigmatic dedication, presumably from the publisher Thomas Thorpe: "To The Onlie Begetter Of These Insuing Sonnets. Mr. W.H." Attempts to identify "Mr. W.H." have become inevitably entangled with the narrative that insists on emerging whenever one reads the *Sonnets* sequentially as they are ordered in the 1609 Quarto.

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that sonnets such as Sonnet 2 were seen as *carpe diem* ("seize the day") poems addressed "To one that would die a maid." Such facts, such recognitions, nevertheless, lose out to the narrative pull exerted by the 1609 collection. The complex and intriguing persona of the poet created by the language of the *Sonnets*, the pattern of emotions so powerfully sustained through the sequence, the sense of the presence of the aristocratic young man and the seductive dark lady—all are so strong that few editors can resist describing the *Sonnets* apart from their irresistible story. (Our own introduction to the language of the *Sonnets*, for example, discusses Sonnet 2 as a poem addressed to the beautiful young man, despite the fact that the sex of the poem's recipient is not specified and despite our awareness that in the seventeenth century, this extremely popular poem was represented consistently as being written to a young woman.) Individually and as a sequence, these poems remain more powerful than the mere mortals who read or study or edit them.

For a very helpful exploration of the *Sonnets* as they are read today, we invite you to read "A Modern Perspective" written by Professor Lynne Magnusson of the University of Toronto and printed at the back of this book.

## Reading Shakespeare's Language: *The Sonnets*

The language of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, like that of poetry in general, is both highly compressed and highly structured. While most often discussed in terms of its images and its metrical and other formal structures, the lan-

guage of the *Sonnets*, like that of Shakespeare's plays, also repays close attention to such basic linguistic elements as words, word order, and sentence structure.

## Shakespeare's Words

Because Shakespeare's sonnets were written four hundred years ago, they inevitably contain words that are unfamiliar today. Some are words that are no longer in general use—words that the dictionaries label *archaic* or *obsolete*, or that have so fallen out of use that dictionaries no longer include them. One surprising feature of the *Sonnets* is how rarely such archaic words appear. Among the more than a thousand words that make up the first ten sonnets, for instance, only eleven are not to be found in current usage: *self-substantial* (“derived from one's own substance”), *niggarding* (“being miserly”), *unfair* (“deprive of beauty”), *leese* (“lose”), *happies* (“makes happy”), *steep-up* (“precipitous”), *highmost* (“highest”), *hap* (“happen”), *unthrift* (“spendthrift”), *unprovident* (“improvident”), and *ruinate* (“reduce to ruins”). Somewhat more common in the *Sonnets* are words that are still in use but that in Shakespeare's day had meanings that are no longer current. In the first three sonnets, for example, we find *only* used where we might say “peerless” or “preeminent,” *gaudy* used to mean “brilliantly fine,” *weed* where we would say “garment,” *glass* where we would say “mirror,” and *fond* where we would say “foolish.” Words of this kind—that is, words that are no longer used or that are used with unfamiliar meanings—will be defined in our facing-page notes.

The most significant feature of Shakespeare's word choice in the *Sonnets* is his use of words in which multiple meanings function simultaneously. In line 5 of the first sonnet, for example, the word *contracted* means

"bound by contract, betrothed," but it also carries the sense of "limited, shrunken." Its double meaning enables the phrase "contracted to thine own bright eyes" to say succinctly to the young man that he has not only betrothed himself to his own good looks but that he has also thereby become a more limited person. In a later line in the same sonnet ("Within thine own bud buriest thy content" [s. 1.11]), the fact that *thy content* means both (1) "that which is contained within you, specifically, your seed, that with which you should produce a child," and (2) "your happiness" enables the line to say, in a highly compressed fashion, that by refusing to propagate, refusing to have a child, the young man is destroying his own future well-being.

It is in large part through choosing words that carry more than one pertinent meaning that Shakespeare packs into each sonnet almost incalculable richness of thought and imagery. In the opening line of the first sonnet ("From fairest creatures we desire increase"), each of the words *fairest*, *creatures*, and *increase* carries multiple relevant senses; when these combine with each other, the range of significations in this single line is enormous. In Shakespeare's day, the word *fair* primarily meant "beautiful," but it had recently also picked up the meaning of "blond" and "fair-skinned." In this opening line of Sonnet 1, the meaning "blond" is probably not operative (though it becomes extremely pertinent when the word *fair* is used in later sonnets), but the aristocratic (or upper-class) implications of "fair-skinned" are very much to the point (or so argues Margreta de Grazia; see Further Reading), since upper-class gentlemen and ladies need not work out of doors and expose their skins to wind and sun. (The negative class implications of outdoor labor carried in the sonnets by "dark" or "tanned" is carried today in the label "redneck.") The second word, *creatures*, had several meanings, referring, for example, to every-

thing created by God, including the plant kingdom, while in some contexts referring specifically to human beings. When combined with the third word, *increase* (which meant, among its pertinent definitions, "procreation," "breeding," "offspring," "a child," "crops," and "fruit"), the word *creatures* takes the reader's mind to Genesis 1.28 and God's instructions to humankind to multiply and be fruitful, while the plant-life connotation of all three of the words provides a context for later words in the sonnet, such as *rose*, *famine*, *abundance*, *spring*, and *bud*. The words Shakespeare places in this first line ("From *fairest creatures* we desire *increase*")—with their undoubted link to concerns about upper-class propagation and inheritance—could well have alerted a contemporary reader to the sonnet's place in a familiar rhetorical tradition, that concerned with persuading a young gentleman to marry in order to reproduce and thus secure his family line and its heritable property. (See Erasmus's "Epistle to persuade a young gentleman to marriage," excerpted in the Appendix, pages 346–52.)

While almost every line of the 154 sonnets begs for a comparable unpacking of Shakespeare's words, we will here limit ourselves to two additional examples, these from lines 2 and 4 of the same sonnet (Sonnet 1). First, the word *rose* in the phrase *beauty's rose* (line 2) engages the reader's mind and imagination at many levels. Most simply, it refers simultaneously to the rose blossom and the rosebush; this double signification, as Stephen Booth points out (see Further Reading), enables the sonnet to acknowledge that although the individual person, like the rose blossom, inevitably withers and dies, the family line, like the rosebush, lives on through continual *increase*. But the *rose* signifies as well that which is most beautiful in the natural world. (See, e.g., Isaiah 35.1: "The desert and the wilderness shall rejoice; the waste ground shall be glad and flourish as the rose.") And *beauty's rose* not

only meant youthful beauty but also inevitably called up memories of the *Romance of the Rose* (widely published in Chaucer's translation), in which the *rose* stands allegorically for the goal of the lover's quest. (The fact that the lover in the *Romance* desires a specific unopened rosebud, rather than one of the rosebush's opened flowers, may have implications for the word *bud* in line 11 )

The word *rose*, then, gains its multiple resonances by referring to both a flower and its bush and through meanings accumulated in cultural and poetic traditions. In contrast, the particular verbal richness of the word *his* in line 4, "*His* tender heir might bear *his* memory" (and in many of the other sonnets), exists because Shakespeare took advantage of a language change in process at the very time he was writing. Until around 1600 the pronoun *his* served double duty, meaning both *his* and *its*. However, in the late 1590s and early 1600s, the word *its* came into existence as possessive of *it*, and *his* began gradually to be limited to the meaning it has today as the possessive of *he*. Because of the emerging gender implications of *his*, the pronoun as used in line 4, while primarily meaning *its* and thus referring to *beauty's rose*, also serves as a link between the sonnet's first line, where the *fairest* creature is not yet a *rose*, and the young man, first directly addressed in line 5.

Because the diction of the *Sonnets* is so incredibly rich in meanings, and because space for our facing-page notes is limited, we have had to curtail severely our notes on words with multiple meanings. Where the primary meaning of a word is clear and where secondary meanings are readily available or are not essential to an understanding of the poem, we all too often have had to remain silent. When it seems possible that a given word might have more than one relevant meaning, the reader should test out possible additional meanings and decide if they add richness to the line. The only hazard here is that some words have picked up

new meanings since Shakespeare's death; careful study of the diction of his *Sonnets* thus compels one to turn to a dictionary based on historical principles, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

## Shakespeare's Sentences

When Shakespeare made the decision to compose his *Sonnets* using the English (in contrast to the Italian) sonnet form, he seems at the same time to have settled on the shape of the *Sonnets'* sentences. The two forms are distinguished by rhyme scheme: in the Italian sonnet, the rhyme scheme in effect divides the poem into two sections, the eight-line *octave* followed by the six-line *sestet*; in the English, it sets three four-line quatrains in parallel, followed by the two-line rhyming couplet. While Shakespeare finds almost infinite ways to provide variety within the tightly controlled form of the English sonnet, and while the occasional sonnet is made up of a single sentence (e.g., Sonnet 29), his sentences tend to shape themselves within the bounds set by the quatrain and the couplet—that is, most quatrains and most couplets are each made up of one sentence or question, with occasional quatrains made up of two or more sentences or questions. (Quatrains that, in modern printed editions, end with a semicolon rather than a period or question mark are often so marked only to indicate that the thought continues into the next quatrain; syntactically, the clause is generally independent and could be completed with a period instead.) The reader therefore seldom finds in the *Sonnets* the long, complicated sentences often encountered in Shakespeare's plays. One does, though, find within the sentences the *inversions*, the *interruptions* of normal word order, and the *postponements* of essential sentence elements that are familiar to readers of the plays.

In the *Sonnets* as in the plays, for example, Shakespeare often rearranges subjects and verbs (i.e., instead of "He goes" we find "Goes he"); he frequently places the object before the subject and verb (i.e., instead of "I hit him," we might find "Him I hit"), and he puts adverbs and adverbial phrases before the subject and verb (i.e., "I hit fairly" becomes "Fairly I hit"). The first sonnet in the sequence, in fact, opens with an inversion, with the adverbial phrase "From fairest creatures" moved forward from its ordinary syntactical position after the verb. This transformation of the sentence "We desire increase from fairest creatures" into "From fairest creatures we desire increase" (s. 1.1) has a significant effect on the rhythm of the line and places the emphasis of the sentence immediately on the "fairest" creature who will be the topic of this and many sonnets to follow. In Sonnet 2 the sentence "Thy beauty's use would deserve much more praise" is transformed into "How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use" (s. 2.9), in large part through a double inversion: the transposing of the subject ("thy beauty's use") and the verb ("deserved") and the placing of the object before the inverted subject and verb. Again, the impact on the rhythm of the line is significant, and the bringing of the word *praise* toward the beginning of the line emphasizes the word's echo of and link to the preceding line ("Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise") through its reiteration of the word *praise* and through repetition of the vowel sound in *shame*.

Occasionally the inversions in the *Sonnets* seem primarily to provide the poet with a needed rhyme word. In Sonnet 3, for example, the difference between "*she calls back* / In thee the lovely April of her prime" and "*she* in thee / *Calls back* the lovely April of her prime" (s. 3.9-10) seems largely to rest on the poet's choice of "thee" rather than "back" for the sonnet's rhyme scheme. However, Shakespeare's inversions in the *Sonnets* often create a space for ambiguity and thus for increased richness and



compression. Sometimes the ambiguity exists only for a moment, until the eye and mind progress further along the line and the reader sees that one of the initially possible meanings cannot be sustained. For example, in Sonnet 5, the line "And that unfair which fairly doth excel" (s. 5.4) seems initially to present "that unfair" as the demonstrative adjective *that* followed by another adjective, *unfair*, until a reading of the whole line reveals that there is no noun for these apparent adjectives to modify, and that "that unfair" is more likely an inversion of the verb *to unfair* and its object, the pronoun *that*. The line thus means simply "deprive that of beauty which fairly excels"—though wordplay on *fairly* as (1) "completely," (2) "properly," and/or (3) "in beauty" makes the line far from simple.

Often the doubleness of meaning created by the inversion remains unresolved. In Sonnet 3, for example, the line "But if thou live remembered not to be" (s. 3.13) clearly contains an inversion in the words "remembered not to be"; however, it is unclear whether "remembered not to be" inverts "to be not remembered" (i.e., "[only] to be forgotten") or "not to be remembered" (i.e., "[in order] to be forgotten"). Thus, while the primary meaning of the line may well be "if you live in such a way that you will not be remembered," the reader cannot dismiss the line's simultaneous suggestion that the young man is living "with the intent of being forgotten" (Booth). The inversion, in other words, allows the line to carry two distinct tones, one of warning and the other of accusation.

Inversions are not the only unusual sentence structures in Shakespeare's language. Often in his *Sonnets* as in his plays, words that would in a normal English sentence appear together are separated from each other, usually in order to create a particular rhythm or to stress a particular word or phrase. In Sonnet 1, for example, in lines 5–6 ("But *thou*, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / *Feed'st* thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel"), the subject